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ABSTRACT

This paper is based on a descriptive study of six elementary school secretaries. The study was undertaken to gain an understanding of the work of the school secretary and how this work might contribute to school effectiveness. Several research methods were combined in this study: onsite observations, interviews with secretaries and their principals, a national survey of elementary school secretaries, and content analyses of job descriptions and of textbooks used in educational administration courses. Data were analyzed separately for each method and then integrated across methods. A comparison of the portraits that emerged from each data set led to three conclusions: (1) there was a high degree of congruence across the data generated from the secretaries themselves; (2) there was a high degree of congruence between these data and the data gathered from elementary school principals; and (3) there was a high degree of discrepancy between the data gathered directly from elementary school secretaries and their principals and the data extracted from job descriptions and textbooks. These similarities and discrepancies are analyzed in the conclusions. (Author/IW)

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The Woman in the Principal's Office

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Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association. San Francisco, CA

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ABSTRACT

This paper is based on a descriptive study of elementary school secretaries. The study was undertaken in order to gain an understanding of the work of the school secretary and how this work might contribute to school effectiveness.

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The Woman in the Principal's Office

This paper is based on a recently completed descriptive study of elementary school secretaries.* The study was undertaken in order to begin to fill a gap in the study of schools, particularly of effective schools. Many of these studies have described the principal but almost all (Wolcott 1973,is a notable exception) have omitted other school office personnel, especially the secretary. This is a curious omission given a pervasive folklore among educators that "secretaries run the schools"

Several research methods were combined in this study: on-site observations at six elementary schools; interviews with the secretaries and principals at each of these schools; a national survey of elementary school secretaries; and content analyses of job descriptions and of textbooks of educational administration. Data were analyzed separately for each method and then integrated across methods.

The use of several sources of data in this study provided an opportunity for making some important comparisons which revealed the degree of congruence among data sources. A comparison of the portraits that emerged from each data set made three facts evident: (1) there was a high degree of congruence across the data generated from the elementary school secretaries themselves, whether in their survey responses, interviews, or as a result of direct observation; (2) there was also a high degree of congruence between these data and the data gathered through interviews with six elementary school

*Casanova, U.(1985) Are you the office? A descriptive study of elementary school secretaries. Unpublished dissertation. Arizona State Univertsity, Tempe,AZ.

principals; and (3) there was a high degree of discrepancy between the data gathered directly from elementary school secretaries and their principals, and the data extracted through content analysis from official documents.

Survey responses

Quantitative and qualitative analysis of the survey responses resulted in a description of the elementary school secretary as a person who is engaged in a multiplicity of tasks covering a wide range of skills. These skills ranged from secretarial to nursing and included a large measure of human relations skills needed to interact successfully with a large variety of clients. These data also suggested that elementary school secretaries, almost all female and mostly mothers, chose these positions because school schedules meshed conveniently with their family responsibilities. However, they have stayed in these positions long after their children are grown and independent. Their long tenure in the job is probably related to their enjoyment of the variety inherent in the role.

The satisfaction they expressed about their position appeared to be related to the enjoyment they claim to derive from working with children and from their perception that their work contributes to the school's educational goals. The job is not without its drawbacks, however, and here also there was consistency. Complaints from the respondents to the survey centered primarily on two issues: low salaries and lack of official recognition. A less frequent complaint was related to status differences.

Interviews

The six secretaries interviewed also entered the profession in order to successfully combine gainful employment and family responsibilities. All have children but most of their children have passed the dependent stage. They have continued to work because they enjoy the school setting and particularly the opportunity to work with children.

These women also engaged in a great variety of tasks and tended to give higher priority to the human relations rather than to the secretarial aspects of the job. Their principals also favored those priorities and had often chosen them on that basis.

The six principals interviewed varied in the amount of responsibility they delegated to the secretary but they were unanimous in valueing the secretary's support and good judgment. This appeared to be of vital concern to them because they tend to see the secretary as an extension of themselves. They were also aware and appreciative of the secretary's unique access to information that might help them to be better administrators.

Site Observations

Observations at six school sites confirmed these perceptions. The centrality of the secretary, the variety of tasks with which they were routinely charged, and the many other tasks that arose on a daily basis were all evident at the sites. Also evident was the balance between secretarial and human relations tasks and the secretary's tendency to favor the latter when a choice had to be made.

Most salient to the researcher was the vital role played by the school secretary in receiving, transmitting, and disseminating information. She was the only person in the school who by virtue of location and role, regularly communicated with all members of the school staff, central office personnel, parents, and the community-at-large. She accepted, transmited, sent, and juggled information to and from all personnel, parents, and the district office. She held the data bank for the school in her head and could usually be counted on to know the names of most students, their parents, all school staff members, district administrators, and often also knew the influential members of the community.

The centrality of the secretary was evident in her organizational and physical location. These women performed their jobs in the operations center of their schools, the place where records and schedules were kept and resources stored. Their workplace was also the location through which most of the information entered the building, whether through the telephone, correspondence, or through personal visits. Since they do not often move from that location they are usually the first ones to greet visitors or respond to emergencies, and almost always the ones to take care of any unassigned tasks that may develop. This sometimes includes unofficially assuming administrative responsibilities during the principal's absence.

Thus, the data gathered directly from school secretaries and their principals was highly congruent. Their consistency suggests that the elementary school secretary is an important and valued

member of the school staff and a vital link in the communication system within and beyond the school walls.

Official views

The data extracted from job descriptions and educational administration textbooks was in stark contrast to the data just described. From the job descriptions one could glean that school secretaries engage in a wide variety of tasks and that these tasks require secretarial and human relations skills. However, the job descriptions put the emphasis on the secretarial and clerical aspects of the job. Activities related to human interaction, particularly with children, were not always mentioned and seldom emphasized. The 10 textbooks of educational administration examined, either ignored the existence of school secretaries altogether or described their work as they might describe office equipment.

Comparing the Data and the Literature

Findings from this study can be best understood if the data are juxtaposed with literature drawing from 3 areas of research: 1) research on schools as organizations; 2) research on secretaries and clerical workers in general; and 3) gender - related research. These 3 areas were chosen to represent 3 sets of characteristics affecting the school secretary: their inherent, ascribed, and cultural characteristics. That is, the secretary's condition of being a female who works as a secretary in a very distinctive setting: an elementary school.

Schools as organizations

Current theoretical and research-based literature on schools as organizations suggests that schools can be better understood as cultural settings than as business organizations. They have been described as multicultural societies where the goal is to build a common identity that can form the basis for committed action in order to allow the organization to function in concert. (Sergiovanni, 1983). This description is more attuned to the family metaphors used by practitioners to describe schools than to the mechanistic, abstract models that have prevailed until recently in the literature on school administration (Hanson, 1985).

When schools are seen as cultural settings, and when the organizational goal is shifted from efficient operation to building a common identity, the perception of the secretary's function must also change. In a business setting the secretary's value lies in her clerical skills first and her personal interaction skills second. In the school setting the secretary is the school for many parents and visitors. If the school is to build a common identity the secretary's help must be sought, for it is the secretary who is most likely to communicate that identity to the public. This was well understood by the principals interviewed for this study and was also mentioned by secretaries in their responses to the survey and in the interviews. The principals and secretaries included in this study emphasized the importance of organizational skills in a

setting that is characterized by variety, discontinuity, and unpredictability. But organizational skills in the school setting are directed not only at an efficient operation of the school plant but also at the facilitation of the school's main function, the delivery of instruction. Many of the secretaries noted in their comments their contribution to the work of teachers and principals and their responsibility for promoting a warm and friendly atmosphere in the school office that is conducive to the facilitation of the school's instructional goals. They describe themselves as models for the students and consider their jobs to be part of the educational endeavor. Their description of the work and of their contribution is more in keeping with a view of the school as a cultural setting than as a business organization. This view was not reflected in the job descriptions or in the examined textbooks of educational administration. This discrepancy suggests that both of these official views reflect a different perception of the schools, and therefore of the school secretary's job.

Secretaries and clerical workers

Research by Kanter, 1977 & Vinnicombe, 1980, about secretaries in other settings suggests that their positions are closely allied with those of their bosses. It is through their bosses that the general skeleton of the job acquires specificity and that promotions and other rewards may be achieved. The marriage metaphor is often used in the business setting where the secretary is sometimes called the "office wife". Secretaries in business organizations also appear to be in charge of the emotional life of

the organizations, (Kanter, 1977) and they are the holders of what Vinnicombe (1980) calls "esoteric organizational knowledge", that is, information about the organization's history and procedures, and personal connections established through time. This information can contribute to their bosses' success as managers.

Elementary school secretaries resemble private business secretaries. They are primarily responsible to one boss who defines the parameters of their job and who is the only one who evaluates them. They are also the repositories of a body of organizational knowledge that is useful and necessary to the principal. Unlike their counterparts in the business world, elementary school secretaries do not move through the organization from the pool typing room to the executive offices; they begin at the school office and tend to remain at one site for long periods of time. The principals change but the secretary is likely to remain. For the school secretary organizational knowledge is composed of the history at the school site, procedural knowledge, and the information and personal contacts acquired through the years. This body of information is very valuable to principals, particularly those entering a new school setting. It is the equivalent of the "esoteric organizational knowledge" (Vinnicombe, 1980) corporate secretaries acquire in their settings. It is also an important component of the school's culture.

A major difference between elementary school secretaries and their business colleagues is in their sphere of responsibility.

Private secretaries in business operate within a limited sphere. They are responsible to only one boss and need to answer to only one set of demands. Conflicts that arise, are likely to be conflicts between loyalty to the boss and loyalty to an abstract organization. A body of research (Kanter, 1977; Vinnicombe, 1980) indicates that secretaries in the business setting tend to give priority to their bosses to whom they give their personal loyalty.

Elementary school secretaries occupy a much more ambiguous position. Although the principal is their only official boss, the school secretary has responsibility to many others as well--teachers, parents, support staff, and particularly to the students. Conflicts that arise in the school setting are more likely to be conflicts between members of these various groups and the secretary may be caught in the middle. School secretaries have difficulty separating their client groups. When asked to whom do they owe their primary responsibility, they prefer to answer with a listing of these client groups. When forced to limit their response to just one client type, it is not the principal but the students to whom they say they are primarily responsible. This difference in the range of responsibility requires the elementary school secretary to continually juggle the demands of her clients not only at the level of service but also some times in situations with moral or ethical implications. This situation makes the school setting not only more demanding than the business setting, but also a setting with far greater potential for conflict.

The do-it-all, be everything-to-all perception of the

elementary school secretary also adds another dimension to the marriage metaphor. While the secretary in the business office can become the "office wife", the secretary in the school office tends to become the "school mother". This metaphor was in fact used by one respondent to the survey in explaing what gave her pride in her job, "That I am referred to as the heart of the school, the mother. I help to make everything run smoothly and I give so many a feeling of security and confidence with my presence. When I am absent everyone waits for my return to help with problems and set them in the right direction". It is also implicit in descriptions of the school secretary as the person who is "always there", the one who takes over in any emergency, or, as one teacher commented, "the lifeline of the school".

Gender-related research

Gender-related research by Gilligan (1982) and Kanter, (1977), provides alternative perspectives for analyzing the elementary school secretary's position. Findings from Kanter's research suggest that structural limitations influence women's aspirations to more challenging jobs. The lack of opportunity results in women seeking their rewards within the social aspects of the job. Gilligan suggests that the differential psycho-social development of males and females results in gender differences that affect adult behavior. According to this line of research, women's development centers on the elaboration of intimacy, relationships, and care while men's development is more likely to result in an emphasis on autonomy and responsibility.

Data from this study tend to support Gilligan's position. That is, they suggest that elementary school secretaries derive their greatest satisfaction in the job from their work relationships and further, that a strong altruistic strain underlies these relationships. This interest in helping was apparent in the high rate of participation in volunteer organizations and activities reported. It was also expressed in the secretaries' statements about salary and recognition. These school secretaries complained about low salaries and lack of official recognition, but also pointed out that they derive their satisfaction from helping others and from contributing to the educational endeavor. Some had rejected opportunities to move up to better paying, higher status positions in the district office. While they took pride in their competence and efficiency it was usually in relation to their contribution to education. Previous research on school secretaries (Simon, 1972) corroborates these findings. It also suggests that these women, as a group, tend to downplay monetary rewards and emphasize relationships. One may argue that structural limitations constitute the controlling factor. However, the data on volunteerism, and the choice of the school over central office positions suggest that, for these women, the human relationships characteristic of the school setting are most important.

Conclusions

Analysis of the data gathered for this study tend to confirm the popular view of elementary school secretaries as multi-talented

individuals who serve many different clients and who play a central role in the operation of the school. This view of elementary school secretaries is not reflected in official job descriptions and educational administration textbooks. In those documents the school secretary, when discussed at all, is described in terms of her clerical and secretarial duties. Very seldom are the tasks related to the human interaction aspect of the schools, even when those tasks, e.g. public relations, are specifically highlighted. The discrepancy in these views appears to be due at least in part, to traditional views of schools as organizations patterned after the business model. In business organizations the secretary is more likely to be mainly responsible for clerical tasks. The data from this study offer strong evidence of the predominance of human interaction factors in the school setting. In that context the school secretary plays a central role in the communication network of the school and the school district.

Another factor contributing to the discrepancy between data sets may be the gender of elementary school secretaries. Gender characteristics of the work force have been known to influence the perceptions held about the position, "... we find that gender contributes to the social definition of skill -- a minority of jobs, it would seem, are defined as being in the lowest clerical grade, not because of the technical content of the work itself, but because the job is usually carried out by a woman..." (Compton & Jones, 1984, p. 4). It appears that the job of the elemtary school secretary belongs in that group.

Unfortunately discrepancy between the officially promulgated perception and the data-based description reported here affects the rewards that accrue to the women who perform these jobs. The lack of recognition and low salaries that school secretaries receive are not commensurate with the work they perform or with the responsibilities they assume.

Lack of recognition is evident, not only in the official views described earlier, but also in the research that has been conducted in the schools. It seems to be a result of what Lofland (1975) calls "the thereness of women" who, like the servants in the mystery stories are always present but remain merely part of the scene,... essential to the set but largely irrelevant to the action. They are simply there" (p.145). This is particularly painful in this case because school secretaries appear to identify so closely with "their schools", "their children", and "their teachers".

I submit that given the centrality of the secretary's work to the operation of the school, omission of this dimension in studies of schools as organizations affects the validity of the findings. It is also likely that the interdependence of principal and secretary in the school office, has an important effect on school administration and that studies of elementary school principals that disregard the secretary's contribution may therefore be flawed.

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